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TAGS: [PREL](#) [SY](#) [IZ](#)
SUBJECT: GOI RESPONSE TO DEMARCHE ON VISIT OF UNDER
SECRETARY BURNS AND COORDINATOR FOR COUNTERTERRORISM
BENJAMIN

REF: STATE 13627

Classified By: Charge d'affaires Robert Ford for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Charge delivered reftel demarche to DFM Labeed Abbawi February 17, regarding the visit to Syria of Under Secretary Burns and Coordinator for Counterterrorism Benjamin. Abbawi said the GOI would not have problems with the visit. Reports in the Arab press that Washington had decided to appoint an ambassador to Syria after a five-year hiatus have dominated many of post's recent conversations with senior Iraqi officials and prepared the way for the February 17 demarche. In a February 9 conversation, Abbawi asked DCM about the recent press reports and observed that Iraqis would not be opposed to an improvement in U.S. - Syrian relations, as this might give Washington more leverage with Syria to push on the Iraq issue. On February 11, PM Maliki's Political Advisor Sadiq Rikabi expressed more skepticism, telling DCM he was concerned that an ambassadorial appointment signaled a shift in U.S. policy toward Syria, at Iraq's expense. DCM stressed our concerns about Syrian policies remain unchanged. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (C) Charge delivered reftel demarche to DFM Labeed Abbawi February 17, regarding the visit to Syria of Under Secretary Burns and Coordinator for Counterterrorism Benjamin. Abbawi said the GOI would not have problems with the visit. Speaking personally, he said he "was not too concerned." He said he had confidence the USG was not changing its policy on Syria in ways that would harm Iraqi interests. He expressed interest in being informed about any SARG views expressed to Burns about Syria's relations with Iraq.

¶3. (C) In the ten-day period before the official announcement of the SARG granting agreement for the new U.S. Ambassador, reports in the Arab press that Washington had decided to appoint an ambassador to Syria after a five-year hiatus dominated many of post's recent conversations with senior Iraqi officials. These conversations helped prepare the way for the February 17 demarche. DFM Abbawi asked DCM February 9 about recent press reports indicating that Washington was considering appointing an ambassador to Syria. He observed that Iraqis would not be opposed to an improvement in U.S. - Syrian relations, as this might give Washington more leverage with Syria to push on the Iraq issue. Abbawi told DCM that Syria is capable of stopping terror networks that use Syrian territory to target Iraq, but argued that Damascus lacks the political will to intervene. He related to DCM his belief that Syrian military intelligence is aware of Ba'athist networks within Syria that funnel support to anti-government terror groups in Iraq.

¶4. (C) On February 12, Assistant Foreign Minister Mohammed al-Hakim, responsible for Arab affairs, told DCM he was hopeful that Iraq and Syria could find a reasonable way to resolve their problems. He suggested that the United States focus on President Bashar al-Assad and intelligence chief Mohammed Nassif as the key players in Syria's regional policy. Hakim, cousin of Islamic Supreme Council in Iraq

(ISCI) party chairman Ammar al-Hakim and former communications minister, noted that he liked Syrian FM Walid Moallem as a person, but believed that he was under the thumb of his intelligence counterparts. He shared an anecdote with DCM to illustrate the relative power and importance of Nassif and Syria's intelligence apparatus in foreign policy: all sides involved in the quadripartite summit between Iraq, Syria, the Arab League and Egypt after the August 19 2009 Baghdad bombings agreed to limit themselves to two participants. Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Moallem turned up with his deputy and an intelligence officer. According to Hakim, Moallem sheepishly told AL chief Amr Moussa that he had been instructed to bring the intelligence officer. Iraqi FM Zebari and DFM Abbawi agreed to the arrangement and brought Hakim to the table to balance the three Syrians with three Iraqis. Hakim told DCM that the Syrian intelligence officer refused to sit behind Moallem and positioned himself to observe his FM's facial expressions during the negotiation.

15. (C) On February 11, PM Maliki's Chief of Staff Tariq Abdallah and Political Advisor Sadiq Rikabi told DCM they were concerned that an ambassadorial appointment signaled a shift in U.S. policy toward Syria, at Iraq's expense. Abdallah acknowledged that it might be helpful to have a senior U.S. envoy in Syria, pushing Damascus to exert the political will to fix the problems that plagued Iraqi-Syrian relations. Rikabi was skeptical, and wanted to know where "the Iraq file" ranked on the list of U.S. priorities for Syria. He asked DCM whether Washington was prepared to put the peace process ahead of Iraq's security concerns.

16. (C) DCM reminded interlocutors February 11 that the appointment of an ambassador to Syria was not a foregone

conclusion. He emphasized to DFM Abbawi and the others that this type of appointment did not signal a change in U.S. policy or message: the United States had a variety of tough issues to address in addition to Iraq's security, including Damascus' support for terror groups like Hezbollah, Hamas, and Palestinian Islamic Jihad, Syrian-Lebanese relations, the future of the peace process and the Golan Heights. DCM asserted that the only change in Washington's position was the advent of high-level discussions between Damascus and Washington spearheaded by Special Envoy George Mitchell. He explained to all his interlocutors that not having an accredited ambassador in place has limited the embassy's contacts in Damascus and the Administration was considering elevating the level of communication with the Syrian government to strengthen its own position. DFM Abbawi on February 17 and PM COS Abdallah on February 20 were visibly comfortable and relaxed about the Burns visit and the possible dispatch of a U.S. ambassador to Damascus.

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